

# Language learning and height

## Book "Factory Girls"

Are you tall enough to learn English? Have you ever reflected on the relationship between height and language learning? Well, I haven't, and I've been in language teaching and learning for almost 20 years. So, I assume that most of you haven't, either. Probably you are even thinking that a relationship between height and language learning is unlikely to exist. However, it does, as I've recently discovered when I read Leslie T. Chang's fabulous book [\*Factory Girls: From village to city in a changing China\*](#).

If you're a rural migrant in the Southern Chinese factory city of Dongguan, your English language learning options are practically non-existent if you're less than 1.6 meters tall. How can that be, you might ask. As I've discovered, height is an important and ubiquitous class discriminator in China. In a society that experienced famine within living memory, nothing shows more clearly whether you're of peasant stock than your height. Taller than 1.6m and you might aspire to clerical work. Smaller and you are stuck on the production floor. Taller than 1.6m and you're on the marriage market. Smaller and all you can hope for is some local boy back home in the village without real prospects. The list goes on.

Now, where does English language learning come in? Unlike their urban peers, rural girls haven't had much education when they "go out" from their village to seek a better life in the factories of the East coast. Nonetheless, they are part of China's English fever and recognize English as a way to become upwardly mobile, and some of the women Chang met in Dongguan, set aside time on top of 11-hour working days to study in private language schools. It was never enough though, and the practice opportunities necessary to improve eluded them. Practice opportunities were available to office workers who had dealings with foreign businesses, to tour guides and to hostesses. However, none of these jobs were available to small women.

Chang, herself Chinese-American, records this poignant conversation, in which one of the women who tries to make it in Dongguan asks her how to improve her English. Chang suggests finding a job in the travel industry.

She placed her palm flat against the top of her head. "Look at me. I don't meet the minimum height requirement. Tour guides must be at least 1.6 meters tall." Right – another dumb suggestion. I had forgotten all the ways in which height could affect the utility of English in a place like Dongguan. (p. 255)

I have supervised research related to English language learning and teaching in China for almost a decade and have read most of the research on the topic published in English. However, never before have I come across the importance of height. I take this as evidence for the importance of doing ethnographic research. Otherwise, what is the point of doing sociolinguistic research if you can't discover anything you hadn't already decided in advance would be important?!

Chang, too, reflects on this question of method. As a political journalist, she apparently got asked all the time why she had avoided politics and China's human rights' record in her book. Her answer is that she hadn't avoided them, they just didn't come up. The rural migrants whose lives she wanted to understand had no interest in politics and human rights. They were interested in getting ahead, in making their migration a success,

in improving themselves, in their relationships with their family back home, in finding a husband, and in their appearance.

Neither a sociolinguistics nor a methods text, *Factory Girls* is well worth reading if your interest is in these fields. I will make it obligatory reading for my research students.



Chang, Leslie T. (2009). *Factory Girls: From Village to City in a Changing China* Spiegel & Grau